Comput. Math. Applic. Vol. 15, No. 5, pp. v–vi, 1988
Pergamon Press plc. Printed in Great Britain

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ROBERT MAXWELL: AN APPRAISAL

The two simultaneous special occasions which are the reasons for this tribute are the 65th birthday of Robert Maxwell, publisher and founder of Pergamon Press, and the 40th anniversary of Pergamon Press itself. Such events are usually occasions for birthday cards, congratulatory telegrams and the like. I do want to use that formality, and so

Happy Birthday, Bob!

and

Happy Birthday, Pergamon!

However, I do not think that this particular occasion should pass with mere banalities, however sincerely extended: for Robert Maxwell, in founding Pergamon Press and by his subsequent activities, caused an innovative revolution in science and became one of the most important proponents and movers of the information revolution now occurring.

I am reminded of an event which took place in a different context and at a different time: during the first visit of Albert Einstein to England. A glittering banquet was given in honor of the great scientist, where the Master of Ceremonies was George Bernard Shaw. In his introductory comments, Shaw—with one of his inimitable hyperboles—compared Einstein to people like Genghis Khan and Attila, both of whom managed to conquer the then known world. Then he said that Einstein was so much greater than either of the other two, because he conquered the entire universe—and he did so without shedding a drop of blood.

What then is the importance of Robert Maxwell, and what worlds has he conquered without any bloodshed?

What is it that Robert Maxwell has done, aside from being an incredibly successful businessman? To answer this question, one has to recall the state of scientific publications at the end of the 1940s. At the time practically all of the journals which existed were controlled by very venerable and respectable scientific organizations. Their quality was by and large very good, but they—as any well-established organization—were very resistant to change. They were extremely conservative exactly at a period of history when the number of working scientists was in the process of an exponential increase. As we all know, most of this increase was due to the opening up of new fields of knowledge: in physics and chemistry, in biology and medicine, in mathematics and geology—in all of these fields and in many others new subfields of great importance opened up. The most dramatic example is the advent of computers at that time—but the flow of information about it, and about the other new fields, was tremendously restricted.

It is to the everlasting credit of Robert Maxwell that he was not only able to see this situation, but despite lack of funds and other obstacles he succeeded in establishing Pergamon Press and turning it in the direction of filling this great publication gap. He did so in many cases in a somewhat revolutionary way: he picked Editors on the advice of some of the best scientists of the day and he gave these Editors complete freedom and financial backing. To the best of my knowledge, he never looked at the question of when a given journal might become self-supporting. His only questions were: Is it needed by the technical community? Is it going to be a first class publication? When the answers were yes, he went ahead.

Pergamon Press publishes today almost 500 journals. Many of them are regularly on the top of citation index listings—which is one infallible measure of quality, reputation and "being with it".

Evolutionary theory teaches us about the development of the various organisms on earth—how our currently existing life forms developed from unicellular organisms. A crucial milestone in this development was the stage at which different parts of a given organism began to perform different functions. To do so efficiently, however, they had to be able to communicate—and they did so by chemical and electrical signals.

Humanity, as an organism, seems to be at the beginning of that precise state of development now. To be efficient about it, society must be able to have extensive communication abilities. So, it is no surprise to me that Robert Maxwell is again at the head of this revolution: not only as a catalyst, but as an active participant.

I wish him well in his new endeavors, in his attempt to develop worldwide communications networks of great efficiency.

Success in this important extension of his single-minded attention to communication is going to bring many benefits: and this time not only to science, but to humanity as a whole.

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